

The International Institute for Middle-East and Balkan Studies (**IFIMES**) in Ljubljana, Slovenia, regularly analyses events in the Middle East and the Balkans. IFIMES has prepared an analysis of the current political situation in Albania in the light of the forthcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for 28 June 2009. The most relevant and interesting sections from the comprehensive analysis entitled **"Preparing for Election Fraud?"** are given below.

ALBANIA AND 2009 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS:

PREPARING FOR ELECTION FRAUD?

In the beginning of 1990 Albania ended 46 years of xenophobic communist regime and introduced a multi-party system. The transition period was difficult and the governments which have led Albania more or less successfully since 1990 had to deal with the heavy burden of unemployment, widespread corruption, organised crime and poor state of infrastructure. .

According to the latest census carried out in 2001 Albania had 3.069.275 inhabitants of which 1,294,196 lived in urban and 1,775,079 in rural communities. The 2001 census survey was the first census organised after the end of the communist regime. Between 1923 and 1989 there were 10 census surveys carried out in Albania which is the highest number after World War II.

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PHENOMENON OF THE "POSITIVE" ROLE OF CORRUPTION

In 2009, almost two decades after the fall of the communist regime, some political and economic changes may be observed in Albania, although crime and corruption still grow like cancer in the Albanian society. However, corruption plays a positive role in Albania since it "greases" the rusty bureaucratic wheels. Until the administrative procedures are simplified the country will not be able to eradicate corruption. Prime Minister Sali Berisha has been attacking corruption more intensively than his predecessors, but he has dealt with its consequences rather than the reasons. According to the data on corruption from Transparency International (2008 CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS INDEX) Albania is ranked 85th of the total of 180 countries included in the study, sharing its place with India, Madagascar, Montenegro, Serbia, Panama and Senegal. In the letter dated 21 January 2009 Transparency International directly informed Prime Minister Sali Berisha about various forms of corruption and pressure committed by Albanian government.

TOO LATE FOR NATO MEMBERSHIP

At 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Albania and Croatia received invitations to become full NATO members in 2009. After all members states conclude the ratification procedure Albania will become a full NATO member and as such it will be able to contribute to the political stability and security in the Balkans. In addition to political stability and economic development, full membership in NATO will bring foreign investments to Albania, thus improving the standard of living of its citizens. From May 2009 onwards Albanian flag will fly in front of NATO headquarters in Brussels.

Prime Minister Sali Berisha's circle stresses that 18 years ago there were not many who believed that Albania would become NATO member in 2009 and probably also a candidate country for EU membership in 2010 and that this will enable normalisation of the situation in Albania which will gradually resemble the countries that are already members of the two organisations.

However, Albanian intellectuals and journalists believe that the reality is different – 18 years is a long period which has disappointed all those who had dreamt of a European Albania in late 1980s.

They argue that Albania has missed the train and that it now lacks the strategy and the national development plan including membership in various multinational organisations. The Albanian public has an impression that the government behaves as a corporation which can operate only on the basis of compensation, compensating one membership for another.

JOINING THE EU THROUGH CZECH REPUBLIC OR SWEDEN

In March 2008 the opposition Socialist Party (PS) leader Edi Rama called the government to submit the application for the status of EU candidate country by end 2008. The Albanian government has still not announced when it plans to submit the application – whether during the Czech or the Swedish EU presidency.

According to the circles near Berisha Albania will apply for the status of EU candidate country this year. The dilemma is whether it will do it during the Czech presidency or after 1 July 2009 when the EU presidency is taken over by Sweden.

The Institute for Democracy and Mediation from Tirana has argued that the government should submit the application during the Czech presidency, anticipating that Albania would be granted the status of candidate country by end 2010 and start the negotiations by end 2011 or beginning 2012.

Greece has recently, as the last state, ratified the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with Albania. Two days later Albanian Minister for EU Integration Majlinda Bregu stated that Albania would apply for membership by mid 2009.

The IFIMES International Institute estimates that it would be realistic to expect Albania to apply for the status of candidate country during the Swedish EU presidency. Parliamentary elections in Albania are scheduled for 28 June 2009 and most EU member states want to make sure they will be carried out in accordance with all the relevant standards. If the elections meet the OSCE/ODIHR standards this will make it easier for Albania to carry out the accession process. However, should the elections turn out to be unfair and fraudulent this will further complicate Albania's internal affairs and hamper its EU integration.

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS AND ELECTION FRAUD

President of the Republic of Albania Bamir Topi announced that parliamentary elections would be held on 28 June 2009. Albania will organise the forthcoming elections for the first time as a new NATO member, therefore this will be an important milestone for its EU integration process.

In the 2005 parliamentary elections, the Democratic Party (PD) led by Sali Berisha won a decisive victory on pledges of reducing crime and corruption, promoting economic growth and ensuring democratic development.

Four years later, the situation related to crime and corruption has not improved. Even the analysts close to the political right in Albania think that the government has not done enough. Some ministers and even Prime Minister Berisha's family members have been connected with corruption.

According to the analysts, the political left dominated by the Socialist Party (PS) aims to eliminate the competitors in the left political block, i.e. the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) led by former Prime Minister Ilir Meta, which usually receives 7%-8% votes. Should the left-wing win the elections, it could use those votes in order to target the Prime Minister position. The analysts close to the political right claim that PS leader Edi Rama has decided to create conflicts in order to eliminate LSI from the political scene. However, the disunited left-wing would be useful for PD leader Sali Berisha who could use those conflicts in order to win the election again.

The IFIMES International Institute estimates that the Albanian political right led by PD has never been as united as it is now, while the political left has become disunited. Sali Berisha has controlled the scene since 2007 when he won local elections in the rural areas where the left-wing had traditionally been stronger. At 2007 local elections the Democratic Party won with 47.86% votes, while the Socialist Party

received 43.74% of the total 1,314,633 eligible voters who participated at the elections.

At the end of November 2008 the Democratic Party (PD) and the Socialist Party (PS) agreed on amendments to the election law. Elections will be held in June 2009. According to the agreement made by the two largest parties Albania would introduce a new election system - the proportional model which would replace the previous partial majority model. This has triggered strong reactions from small parties which believe the new election model will keep them out of the parliament. The deputies from small parties went on a 10-day hunger strike which brought no results. The two main political parties insisted on what they had agreed on and adopted the new election law.

Small parties such as LSI led by Ilir Meta and others have accused the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party of planning an election fraud. LSI claims that under the new election law the electoral commissions may be composed of the representatives of the DP and the SP only without the presence of other parties, thereby functioning as bipolar structures which will control and count the votes without the interference of other parties competing at the elections. This makes the election fraud much more plausible and endangers free elections and the democratic process in Albania. The new election law is also called "the deception law" of Sali Berisha's autocratic regime which was unfortunately supported also by the opposition Socialist Party. It should be noted that the election threshold for political parties is 3% while for coalitions it is 5%.

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Analysts have pointed to the possibility that the Democratic Party may prepare an election fraud at the forthcoming elections in Albania. At the last elections (2005) the election fraud planned by the Socialist Party was prevented.

Sali Berisha's Democratic Party has improved its image to some extent, but the question is, whether this is enough to win the elections. Despite a negative public perception it is quite possible that Berisha (PD) wins about 40% of votes and forms the government with one of the small political parties.

POLITICAL LUSTRATION

In late 2008 Albanian parliament passed the law on lustration without the participation of the opposition, which was strongly condemned by the international community.

On the day the law was passed a strong reaction also came from the United States Ambassador to Albania John Withers who condemned the law as a document of the Democratic Party which opens some serious legislative and constitutional dilemmas,

and he called the government to withdraw it and consult international experts. Council of Europe Secretary General Terry Davis stated that the lustration law shows no good intentions and may cause great injustice.

The lustration law was criticised also by Freedom House which fears that the law may jeopardise freedom in Albania, which will be negatively reflected in the 2009 report on Albania.

Albania is currently burdened with the involvement of Sali Berisha's government in corruption problems. Berisha therefore hastened the adoption of the lustration law in order to replace some people at important positions especially in the judicial administration and prosecution service who have been attacking the government and him personally. According to Berisha those people occupied some high positions during the communist regime.

Although the lustration law triggered strong reactions and criticism inside and outside Albania, Berisha is determined to go through with it. The last hope is President of the Republic of Albania Bamir Topi who has the constitutional right to return the law to the parliament for reading, but he has not reacted yet. Berisha seems to be satisfied, but the question is how much longer?

Despite his claims that the lustration law will be just and that the 2009 elections will be fair and free, Berisha's conflicts with the US Ambassador, EU delegation and OSCE representatives are very significant.

Analysts have analysed Sali Berisha's personality as a typical dinarid type, acting very passionately, adding the unnecessary psychological tone to all topics and ready to oppose any challengers, including the international community. His and therefore also DP's problem is that they lack a comprehensive, detailed and coherent political platform in order to resolve the problems Albania is facing. Berisha instead offers compensation, claiming that communism is still strong and using in the "fighting-with-the-dead-Indian" style. Berisha would do anything and use any means to remain in power. For instance, the construction of highway connection with Kosovo is turning into a campaign to disunite the Albanians instead of being a project which would unite the nation. Like in other countries in transition Albania is experiencing restoration of totalitarianism, supplemented with autocracy at lower levels. For example, each leader is an authoritarian person and each party is totalitarian, which creates the conditions for an increasing number of fractions that eventually transform into new political parties.

Many Albanians have an impression that the current events resemble those in 1996 (one year later - in 1997 - Albania almost collapsed) when Sali Berisha's Democratic Party won the elections with 90 % of votes. The fear that is present among the people shows that 2009 will be a very intensive year for the political scene in Albania.

Analysts note that the lustration law as well as everything else is designed on the basis of some capricious political party principles. It is not understandable why so much energy is spent on something that no longer plays any significant role in Albania. Berisha is zealously fighting as if he had to deal with the dilemma of choosing between communism or democracy, while the real dilemma lies in opting for democratura or democracy.

The IFIMES International Institute believes that 2009 is not the same as 1996, nor in terms of internal nor foreign politics. Everything is different, only Sali Berisha is still the same.

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